

18 dead as car bomber smashes into UN office

AT least 18 people were killed yesterday in a car suicide bombing at the United Nations office in the Nigerian capital Abuja.

A car laden with explosives rammed through two gates before slamming into the concrete building as it teemed with hundreds of staff.

No group claimed immediate responsibility, although Africa's most populous nation faces a growing threat of homegrown terrorism.

Militants from a radical Muslim sect have previously carried out attacks in the capital, though never on a foreign target.

Unrest in the country's oil-rich Niger Delta in the south has also spawned a violent militant group. Witnesses described a saloon car

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ramming through gates at the UN compound as guards tried to stop it hitting the main building.

The suicide bomber crashed the car into a reception area and detonated the explosives, inflicting the most damage possible, a spokesman for the Nigerian National Emergency Management Agency said.

Michael Ofilaje, a UNICEF worker, said the building shook with the explosion.

'I saw scattered bodies,' he added. 'Many people are dead.'

The building, which housed about 400 employees of the UN, is in the same neighbourhood as the U.S. embassy and other diplomatic posts.

Nigerian President Goodluck

Jonathan's office called the attack 'barbaric, senseless and cowardly'. He promised to increase security.

Nigeria, with a population of 150million, is split between a largely Christian south and Muslim north.

In recent months, the country has faced an increasing threat from the radical sect Boko Haram, which wants to implement a strict version of sharia law.

The sect has carried out assassinations and bombings, including the June car bombing of the national headquarters of Nigeria's federal police in Abuja which killed at least two.

Boko Haram has also been linked to groups in other African countries said to be sympathetic to Al Qaeda.

HANG ON, this can't be right. Turning off a B-road in Essex, my taxi driver appears to have pulled into the world's most boring street. Characterless pale-bricked houses with flat UPVC windows line either side of the grey pavements and wheelie bins stand like sentries outside white plastic doors.

It's the John Major of streets. The sort of cul-de-sac where you imagine the prize for most exotic pet would be won by someone's hamster. Maybe a budgie or two. A parakeet, at a push.

It's certainly not the kind of street you expect to find a fully-grown emu wandering around someone's living room. Yet, within minutes of arriving at Iain Newby's five-bedroom detached home, I come face-to-beak with Beaky, a 6ft tall emu who seems to think she's human.

Two-year-old Beaky lives cosily alongside Iain and his family in this quintessentially suburban corner of Southend-on-Sea, Essex.

The Australian outback it is not. Yet the 12st bird seems more than happy to rub alongside her non-feathered family — 44-year-old Iain, his wife Lisa, 36, and their five very boisterous sons and one daughter, aged from ten months to eight.

It's a most curious sight. Iain — a cross between Crocodile Dundee and Status Quo's Rick Parfitt — welcomes me in and guides me through the living room where Lisa is vacuuming and several blonde-haired children are tearing in and out with their toys.

So far, so relatively normal.

But then, at the back of the house, I spy a vast wooden porch. And there, through the windowless frames, I catch my first glimpse of Beaky and she doesn't seem at all pleased to see me.

She gives me the evil eye as I approach her tentatively, gradually becoming more aware of a strange bongo-like sound she seems to be producing as she struts up and down the garden.

'That's the sound she makes when she's unsure about something, so it's just a warning signal,' says Iain. 'It's an air pocket at the base of her throat that she pops and it makes that sound. But don't worry, she's just sizing you up. She's a bit wary of strangers, but she won't bite you. She's very tame.'

Reassured, I move a little closer. 'She's more likely to kick you,' he adds.

It's clear I'm the newbie in the Newby house, and Beaky doesn't like it.

But after five minutes she seems to have decided I'm no threat, so I venture to pet her. Close-up, I'm surprised by how pretty she really is.

Her large brown glassy marbles of eyes peer at me through long Liz Taylor eyelashes. She has a long, elegant blue and emerald-coloured neck, covered in soft black down.

Her body is a huge puffball of pale brown and white plumage, slightly damp from the rain. But it's her ugliest feature which transfixes me — her strong, thick legs with razor-sharp claws which could rip apart a wire fence (not to mention a nervous journalist) with one sharp kick.

Having established I am friend not foe, I try to win Beaky's affections further by showing her a little present I've brought in the shape of a Rod Hull-style emu hand puppet.

Big mistake. Beaky is not amused (or should that be emu-sed?)

She eyeballs her stuffed-toy look-alike and, for a moment, I fear she's going to give me the Michael Parkinson treatment. But Beaky merely struts off in a diva-like strop. The message is clear: there's only room for one emu around these parts.

Emus — or *Dromaius novaehollandiae* to give them their scientific name — are native to Australia and the second largest bird in the world in height, next to the ostrich.

Given the space, they can reach speeds of up to 40mph and Beaky could — if she had a run-up of 100m or so — jump over a 6ft fence.

NOT THAT it's possible in this garden, which can be no bigger than 60ft long and 15ft wide. And not that she seems in any way keen to make a run for it (I suspect she realises just what a cushy number she has here).

Beaky was a gift to Iain from his wife for Christmas two years ago and has been part of the family since.

'Lisa bought me an egg from an emu farm,' says Iain. 'It arrived in the post in bubble wrap and I didn't think it would hatch. But I made an incubator and put it inside, just in case.'

'Lisa was expecting our Peter and the midwife came and checked her out and then put her stethoscope on the egg and said: "Iain, I think there's movement. I think there's something in here", and I was really surprised.'

'A few days later, the egg started breaking up and the first thing we saw was a massive beak poking out.'

by Jill Foster

Straight away Lisa said: 'Ah, Beaky' and that's how she got her name.'

Beaky was immediately welcomed into the large Newby clan.

'She's convinced the children are her siblings and loves being with them,' says Iain. 'I put her in one of their old playpens and she'd sit with us in the living room and eat at the same time. But within a few months she was already 3ft tall and could leap out of it.'

'She used to sleep in what is now my office, but as she got older she needed more space, so I built her a hut outside. But if we're all out we usually leave the television on for company and if we haven't locked the back porch properly, she'll undo the catch, sneak in, sit there on the carpet and watch TV.'

'We'll come back and see that a couple of ornaments have been knocked over, but she'll be happily sitting there watching the box.'

WHILE the children clearly love being with the big bird, Iain's wife Lisa may be starting to rue the day she ever bought Beaky home.

'It's not ideal her bringing all that mud in from the garden when you've got little ones crawling around,' she says, shaking her head.

As if on cue, Beaky suddenly has a little accident. Lisa, clearly used to such behaviour, merely sighs and fetches the mop.

Next up it's feeding time. The mighty bird may not peck, but she's certainly peckish. Although she can eat 14lbs of corn a week and about 5lbs of fruit and vegetables, including broccoli, peas and cauliflower, it's still not enough to satisfy a hungry emu.

'She'll eat anything,' explains Iain. 'Drill bits, scouring sponges, keys ... even money. A friend put his change and a £10 note on the window ledge just for a second and she grabbed it and it was gone. I tried to stop her, but it went down in one.'

But despite the occasional disaster, Beaky does earn her keep.

Last year, she laid an impressive 18 eggs — each about ten times the size of a chicken's — during her laying season between January and March.

'One egg can feed the entire family,' says Iain. 'They take about 20 minutes to soft boil. We sit around the table with slices of toast and all get a dip, it's great.'

Beaky may be the Newbys' most impressive pet, but she's by no means the family's only animal.

Located around the house in ponds, cages, pens, incubators — not to mention the 130ft outbuilding that Iain built in the back garden for various lizards, spiders and snakes — are more than 200 creatures.

As he lists them, it sounds like the roll call at Chester Zoo.

'We've got macaws, parrots, 11 large Mediterranean tortoises, a piranha, turtles, soft-shelled turtles, iguanas, leopard geckos, plated lizards, bearded dragons, tarantulas, a scorpion, horn snakes, king snakes, a 15ft reticulated python, Burmese pythons, boa constrictors, rat snakes, two crocs, four dogs, five cats, a African dwarf hedgehog. Oh



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